



CURATOR'S STATEMENT

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As one of San Diego's best known artists in the 1970s and 1980s, Allan Morrow produced visually stunning paintings – abstractions grounded in landscape – that were among the most memorable art emanating from this region and exhibited internationally during those decades. Looking back at the substantial oeuvre Morrow created over the course of his artistic career, its quality has been consistently high: conceptually engaging, impeccably designed, and flawlessly executed. During the 1980s Morrow exhibited with the Bullmoose Group, described by one critic as “urban art guerillas,” whose members included Ron Williams, Eric Christian, Stuart Burton, Tom Frankovich, and Morrow. After an absence of nearly twenty years from the city's art scene, Morrow has reemerged with a new body of work, his “Fences Series,” in which he reinterprets earlier themes while taking them in a fresh and surprisingly different direction. Morrow's new works, like his earlier ones, continue to resonate with the spirit of life-long artistic influences including Robert Rauschenberg, Wayne Thiebaud, Mark Tobey, and Richard Allen Morris, one of only a few San Diego-based artists who have achieved international recognition, albeit belatedly.

The works at the core of Morrow's “Fence Series” are highly structured, minimal-looking compositions incorporating, at most, four or five flat and three-dimensional elements. For lack of a better term, Morrow calls them constructions, although they combine aspects of painting, sculpture, photography, and drawing. In essence, these

works are contemporary landscapes or “urbanscapes,” but they are just as satisfying if viewed as pure abstractions. Immediately noticeable in this exhibition is the long, horizontal format – suggesting a panoramic view – of many of the works on display. Morrow employed this device extensively in his earlier work; one that he continues to explore and use to great effect in the “Fence Series.” It should be noted that this series also includes preparatory watercolors and drawings, a number of which are on display in the current exhibition.

The conceptual and visual focal points of Morrow’s recent constructions are miniature, fence-like structures painstakingly fashioned from balsa and bass wood and other materials. Representations of picket fences and construction fences predominate. Picket fences and board fences are not only potent symbols of the American Dream, but modern and contemporary artists have long found the graphic power of their repetitive shapes to be particularly appealing. Construction fences can symbolize renewal (as in new construction) or decay (when they surround abandoned construction sites). Sometimes Morrow’s diminutive construction fences function as tiny blank canvases upon which he creates delicately executed paintings. Depending on their design, these can be simultaneously read as abstractions suggesting landscapes, crude attempts to paint over graffiti, military camouflage, or hilariously downsized or spontaneously occurring Abstract Expressionist masterpieces. On some of these fences, images from advertising or text are incorporated and, with another nod towards subversion and humor, images are subtly visible through the cracks and holes of the construction fences depicted in *Look 70* (2009), *Property Line* (2009), and *Keep Out* (2009). Other times, Morrow’s recreations of construction fences are more straightforward...but always artistically so. Using painting, sanding, and spattering (hand-spattered, not mechanical) techniques, Morrow has perfected his ability to create the illusion of weathered, patched, and graffitied wood. In the process, he has raised recreating the abuse taken by construction fences in the inner city to high art.

The military references in Morrow’s art – alluded to in the previous paragraph – are not coincidental. Like many men of his generation, Morrow served in the military during the Vietnam War. In fact, the aerial views of the topography he flew over in the combat helicopters of the 101st Airborne Division were to become a major influence on the landscapes he painted and drew years later. Another compositional and symbolic element that Morrow uses in many of his constructions has military origins. It is a three dimensional, thin, linear, horizontal form representing a painted curb, but also bearing a strong resemblance to a military service campaign ribbon. (Ron Williams, a Vietnam War veteran, well-known San Diego artist of the 1980s, and Bullmoose Group member, also used similar imagery in his art.)

Formal training is critical for artists – and Morrow is extensively schooled in that discipline. However, it is those who have found a way of using their life experience as a springboard for their creativity who create the most engaging art. Closing in on sixty years of age, Morrow has held a number of jobs – including his military service – that have shaped his art. Necessity, of course, dictated that he do whatever he could to support his family in a city where the market for art, for the most part, has always been challenging. Throughout his life, Morrow has worked for various art galleries, frame shops, art organizations, and as an art teacher. But in terms of the imagery figuring into his art, Morrow cites employment as a long distance trucker when he was a young man,

and the many years he spent in various positions working for San Diego's Parks and Recreation Department, as being especially influential.



ALLAN MORROW *Yellowish Fence in Yellow* (2010)
Mixed media, 20 x 16 inches



ALLAN MORROW *E Street* (2010)
Mixed media, 15 x 15 inches

The City jobs he held ranged from being a park groundskeeper to, ultimately, a supervisor in the city's shoreline parks division. A considerable amount of Morrow's time was spent on the road driving long distances every day. Most of us don't notice mundane and ubiquitous structures like curbs, sidewalks, traffic medians, and streets; we certainly don't think about them in an artistic context. Towards the end of Morrow's civil service employment when he was a landscape contract inspector, his observational skills – and tendency towards perfectionism – served him well. As he describes it, "One would think that these jobs were the exact opposite of being a studio artist. However, being outdoors and the visual and material stimulation of the environment I worked in made up for the monotony. Early on, especially with the more mundane jobs, I enjoyed working with my hands and having time to think about art. I didn't even tell my co-workers that I was an artist."

Other aspects of Morrow's works merit discussion but had to be omitted from early drafts of this statement because of space and time constraints. These include discussing Morrow's incorporation of photographs (his own) into every construction, and his formidable skills as a colorist.

From a curatorial perspective, the constructions showcased in Morrow's current exhibition are a clever fusion of elements, every aspect of which is carefully thought out

and painstakingly executed. Morrow's acute sensitivity to materials, sense of design, and flawless technique are a formalist's dream. The beauty of these works is in the details: the ways Morrow treats the edges of the forms (deckle edges versus sharp); the subtle interplay of textures (the shine of the photos versus the worn finishes of the rest of the elements of the composition, etc.); and his use of subdued or dark colors "punched up" with vibrant, saturated ones.

Taken as a whole, Morrow's works are not only exceptionally handsome and sophisticated arrangements of shapes and color, but the fact that they can be read on a number of different levels makes them a perfect marriage of concept and form.

EXHIBITION: Allan Morrow – Painting Fences

DATES: April 10 – June 19, 2010

LOCATION: Pacific Beach/Taylor Branch Library Gallery

NOTE: An exhibition showcasing approximately fifty collages from Morrow's "Periodical Art" series (Morrow created nearly two hundred of these using illustrations that appeared in leading art magazines from the 1970s and 1980s) will open at Central Library next month. These have never been exhibited.



ALLAN MORROW *Sooner or Later* (2010) Mixed media, 16 x 24 inches